

Finding the Right Speaking Skills Textbook

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Finding the Right Speaking Skills Textbook

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Abstract

The rise in demand for oral communication classes at universities in Japan has left some teachers with many such classes to teach. When planning a curriculum for these classes, ideally, a teacher should go through a thorough systematic process. However, real time constraints make this process almost impossible. A way to save time and still deliver a good curriculum is to use a pre-published textbook, but the number of choices of suitable textbooks can be daunting. This paper provides a practical chart that teachers can use as a checklist to evaluate possible textbooks they are considering for an oral communications class, based on the criteria of physical characteristics, organization, topics and activities.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Much is known, and so will not be discussed in depth, about the lack of skill with regard to oral skill that still exists throughout the Japanese compulsory education system, and culminates in the graduation of non-communicative university students. Primarily, this had been due to the heavy emphasis on a grammar-based curriculum. This tended to lead to practicing only reading and writing in the class, as has been pointed out by Yoshida (2002) who claims that in Japan there exists “a failure to understand the fundamental differences between so-called traditional approaches and the communicative approaches”. However, a counter-measure over the last few years, or so, has seen prominence being given to the need for more effective oral skills instruction. At the university level now, even if students study only one lesson of English a week that will tend to be a speaking skills related class. This gradual shift from reading and writing to oral and aural has come about

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probably, at least in part, to a general recognition for a need for more communicative students upon graduation from university and the “cool factor”, attached to being able to speak English. Plus, it seems foreign teachers have filled the void of teaching speaking skills that has been left by their Japanese colleagues in some Japanese institutes.

As a result of these factors, some foreign teachers are finding that they now have to prepare more and more speaking syllabuses to meet the demand that has arisen for such courses. Owing to the size and variety of levels and purpose of speaking courses it can be said that no two classes will have the same curriculum, but there maybe certain similarities that classes share at a particular level of proficiency. For instance, a speaking syllabus class aimed at beginner level students, whatever the methodology, should at least include greetings or talking about topics such as hobbies or family, etc.

One list of acronyms compiled by Macmillan Publishers (2002) coins the acronym, TENOP (Teaching English for No Specific Purpose); a play on words of it's productive counterpart, ESP (English for Specific Purposes). TENOP classes describe a learning situation “where the purpose is, at best, vague” and are usually convened to seemingly allow students to meet university graduation requirements”. These compulsory classes at first and second year level at universities have been criticized for being haphazard in nature with teachers merely filling up time for ninety minutes. For the teacher who is faced with teaching a possible large number of these oral skills classes, at perhaps more of a beginner level for first and second years, the choice of curriculum is, of course, important, unless it is to degenerate to the TENOP level. One type of choice to make about the curriculum is whether to build the curriculum from scratch and make materials suitable to each individual class or, on the other hand, use some kind of pre-published textbook. The ideas contained in this paper aim to help teachers who make the latter choice and may also be working comparatively alone and have difficulty in finding a textbook that suits a class of oral skills that a teacher might end up teaching.

1.2 Starting from scratch

In an ideal world the teacher would produce a systematic plan for each class following a number of points. Writers like Brown (1995) indicate a now widely accepted approach. The process starts with a needs analysis of the students and the teaching environment, which then translate into the goals and, more specifically, the

objectives for a curriculum. Then testing is put in place, followed by making the actual materials and then, finally, teaching them. Each of these stages should also be under constant evaluation throughout the curriculum process. This approach is of course the right way to undertake any class, not just speaking. However, this world is not an ideal one and teachers in Japan have to, as mentioned, teach many part-time classes due to increased demand. Also, the scarcity of full-time and tenured positions, (Aldwinckle,1999) means that a teacher can potentially have a large number of part-time classes at a number of institutes to make a living. This demand and high number of classes shortens the amount of time that teachers can spend on preparing for each class. Therefore, instead of making a full-systematic plan for each class the teacher may opt for the other choice, using pre-published materials.

1.3 Pre-published materials

This surge in speaking skills classes has been met with flurry of textbooks from the publishing houses to make teachers' lives easier. For anyone contemplating using a textbook there are many options. Indeed, a check of four of these major publishing companies of English - based materials in Japan (Cambridge, Longman, Macmillan and Oxford) found that there were about forty four books that could be used in that kind of oral skills class. These included titles from adult and teenage learner groups and mixed skills and purely speaking texts between beginner and high beginner proficiency.

For the teacher who does not have time to produce individual curriculums, these materials offer a reasonably cohesive set of activities put together as a curriculum. They appear with enough units to cover a particular semester, with, usually, a selection of stimulating topics for the students to address.

Advantages of using pre-published textbooks

After recognizing the situations that have lead to a proliferation of textbook adoption for classes, it is important to also consider some of the benefits for teachers of using a pre-published textbook as a curriculum.

Firstly, again, freeing up of a teacher's time cannot be stressed enough as a deciding factor in using a textbook. The busy teacher faced with teaching many "koma" is constantly under pressure to maintain a level of interest of English in his or her students, and if the teacher has to produce each set of materials from scratch then there maybe a drop in quality of materials as the workload increases. Having

a textbook allows the teacher to concentrate purely on the teaching and less on the production side.

The time element also goes hand in hand with the next point, ease of use. The accompanying teachers' guide will have usually been written by an ESL professional, who has spent a lot of time in the classroom, and will offer suggestions on style and order of doing the activities for a unit. This could also be seen as a basic teaching aid to beginning teachers. Furthermore, many of the big publishing companies also offer supplementary materials to enhance existing materials, including dictionaries, vocabulary lists and workbooks, for private study to accompany a text outside of the classroom.

The third point is availability. Upon request, most publishing companies will send up to three textbooks for free inspection. A representative of a publishing company is also in a position to advise about a suitable text or provide information about what kind of textbooks teachers in other universities are using. Information can be further obtained by in-depth websites set up by the same publishing companies that sort their textbook by characteristics into table form to make selection even easier.

The next advantage is uniformity. Most medium sized universities entrust the teaching of oral skills to a number of teachers, who will of course differ in, say, approach, but by having the teachers agree to use the same textbooks to teach the same level of classes, the students can be close to being taught at the same level. This way they can be tested in a similar fashion, too, helping to establish more clearly the range and depths of proficiency in a particular establishment.

Finally, linked with the previous point, many textbooks are now offered in a set, typically, beginner level through to intermediate or advanced. A teacher wishing to teach the same class after one textbook has finished, can simply pick the next textbook in the set and resume teaching. The textbooks in a series will have been graded; each subsequent edition will increase with word and grammatical difficulty.

Disadvantages of using pre-published textbooks

After looking at the advantages of using a pre-published textbook, it is now time to turn to the down sides of such texts.

To begin with, the idea of uniformity, from above, could also be disadvantage. There are "super"-selling textbooks that are small in number, but are widespread in use. One book in particular, *Interchange* (Richards 2002) is widely used, not only

in Japan, but also in South East and central Asia. It is a book designed for ESL students, and might suit a multi-racial class studying in New York, but it is often used in Japan in an EFL setting. This might be an interesting book, but I would argue for its use in two widely different formats, such as Japan, and say, other English speaking countries. In America, as an ESL country, the needs of the foreign students tend to be survival, but in Japan students are not driven by those same necessities, so using the same textbooks seems inconsistent.

Each class and each individual student within that class will have, to some degree, a different way of seeing the world, different reasons for studying English and most importantly different tastes and interests. Most textbooks tend to concentrate on a small number of high interest areas that match current youth trends, say for example, talking about the TV, hobbies or sports. No doubt some topics will probably appeal to the majority of students in a class, maybe even in Asia, but the same topics may also preclude a large number of students who are not so interested in those topics that a textbook might offer, or may come from a country where such topics are irrelevant. Do students that come from Thailand and Japan have the same attitudes about fashions; even though they may be using the same kind of textbook? In Japan, especially, topics and popular fads can soon lose their appeal and be replaced by the next fad or fashion a lot quicker than in other Asian countries. Writers of textbooks should monitor changes in fashion and thinking and produce textbooks that reflect such changes.

Next, not only can the students be different, but disparity can also be seen in teaching styles. If we assume that one particular professional wrote a textbook, and, (possibly) another compiled the teachers' manual, then a third is going to teach this same text to students. The potential for differences in teaching methodology, and subsequently planning a class activity, between all three of these parties is large.

Finally, while representatives from publishing companies do have a unique insight into the type of books that are being sold in Japan, they are, at the end of the day, governed by making profits. Based primarily on customer buying trends, representatives can sometimes only recommend the books that their brokers or bosses are telling them to sell. The advice, however helpful, should be looked at objectively.

2.0 Choosing a pre-published text

After weighing up the pros and cons of choosing a textbook for a class and deciding that time is not on your side, how does a teacher go about deciding which textbook to use for a speaking skills class, taking into consideration possibly biased publishing houses and the huge number of texts that are available? This paper will now present advice for the teachers who find themselves in the position of teaching a class, possibly compulsory, at lower proficiency university level and need to choose a good textbook. To begin with criteria have been laid down and important consideration given to the four following areas of textbook selection : physical characteristics, organization, topics and activities. Within these four criteria a number of sub-criteria are introduced to make the selection process more comprehensive for a teacher. The four main criteria and their sub-criteria can be seen on the chart on Appendix A. It presents a way of using these individual factors to try to come up with a rating score with which to judge the best overall textbook, in comparison to others that a teacher may rate by the same scale.

2.1 Physical Characteristics

Very often the textbook writers are at the whim of the publishing companies in terms of physical print and pictures, both of which in large amounts will push up the cost of the book. However, physical characteristics are what can be visually stimulating about a textbook for our students and the more visually stimulating the presentation of a textbook the happier the students will feel about using it. For the oral skills teacher there are seven areas related to pictures, text, activities and examples used in textbooks to look when appraising physical characteristics.

Pictures, rather than text are always more stimulating for the students to look at, and the chosen textbook should have a good mixture of glossy pictures and eye-catching items. Of course, the subject and style of these pictures should be considered, too. If everyone that appears in the pictures is middle-aged then the book might be considered unsuitable for a university level class. Similarly, the objects that appear in the picture must be relevant to the time and fashions as much as possible. So, obviously, pictures featuring students using their “tamagochis” are not going to be up-to-date and relevant.

Not only the pictures themselves can be stimulating, but also the text. A variety of texts sizes and styles are a lot better than having the monotony of one font

or style on every page.

Textbooks should present ideas that the writer thinks are important for students to know, like a new set of vocabulary or a grammar point, in a box. These points should be distinguishable from other text on the page, by highlighting so that students will notice them.

Next, once the correct content of the pictures and styles of text has been established, spacing between these two is important. Textbook publishers do not usually have the luxury of liberal white space on a page as space costs money. At the other extreme too many words and pictures on one page can be confusing and even create a stress for students, as they try to both comprehend and separate it all. A medium of space, text and pictures that do not crowd or inhibit one another should be one goal of a textbook.

Finally, the directions and examples that come before the activities should be really clear. In the classroom, of course, a teacher can fill in any gaps in mis-expectation, but good directions and examples should be able to clearly present ideas to a student who is looking at an activity for the first time alone.

2.2 Organization

There are only two points to consider in the section for organization. The first, table of contents, should comprehensively cover all the language and ideas that are to be covered in the text. That includes types of vocabulary, structures and more detailed information about purpose and flow of individual activities. An effective table of contents makes review easier, can give motivated students an opportunity to preview units and gives the teacher a good idea of what units to use and in what order.

The other point is the organizing units for the book. The choices available include : grammar, functions, skills and topics. Many teachers and textbooks now use layered or mixed syllabuses, which employ a number of organizing units with different priority weightings, for example topics being a main organizing unit and functions being sub-units within the main units. By using a layered syllabus a student can gain exposure to a wider range of skills and ways of engaging topics.

2.3 Topics

Since the introduction of the communicative movement in Japan, topics seem to have been the most popular organizing unit among foreign teachers. Topics put

the emphasis on content rather than more fragmented concepts such as structure or functions. Mohan (1986) believes that among other things syllabus based on content facilitate comprehension, motivate students and make teaching meaningful. They also offer students easy access to existing schema, and they offer a chance to learn about foreign values related to the same topics, teaching not only language, but also cultural values. When evaluating a textbook teachers should consider the following four facets to topics, including their relevance, number, the way they are grouped and the depth of a topic.

Like pictures, but more so, topics should reflect ideas that are interesting and also relevant to the students. The topics should also encapsulate elements of Western values to start students thinking about the world outside of Japan.

In further analysis of the topics it is necessary to consider relevance, size, groupings and depth. The size and grouping of topics should offer students lots of opportunity for choice, as all the topics may not be to the liking of all the students. In that way students can accept or reject topics that might appear in the textbook, giving a lot more topic choice. Furthermore, some topics should offer the scope for being explored in greater depth, not just through casual conversation. A good text will provide the opportunity for the topic to be expanded into related areas. For instance, a topic that starts by getting students to talk about their families could provide a chance for students to make their own family trees to deepen understanding and attach personalization to the topic itself.

2.4 Activities

This section holds by far the most comparison points (eighteen in Appendix A), and could be considered the most important for selection as this section covers what students will be engaged in for the duration of the class. If attention is not paid here then students' time could well be wasted. In this section many areas such as variety, effectiveness and authenticity need to be addressed.

Firstly, variation is important to keep student interest and practice different skill areas. If the main focus of the textbook is to be oral communication it should offer opportunities to practice both listening and speaking skills. However, a further combination of some reading and writing into the curriculum will reinforce each other as well as offering a different slant in interest and direction.

Next, whatever the size of a unit the activities included therein must build on each other in a systematic fashion. Most communicative teaching theories used in

Japanese classrooms advocate a controlled to less controlled flow of activities, such as the P-P-P (Presentation, Practice and Production) model or the Task Cycle (Willis, 1996). Although it should be noted that Willis does also advocate dealing with grammar (language focus) problems, highlighted in the task, after task completion. However, any textbook that puts vocabulary exercises at the end of a unit, unless there is an obvious theory to back it up, or it's some kind of review, would be of little use. The standard norm that appears to work is reading or vocabulary activities that lead into a listening exercise. This might then be followed by speaking (pronunciation and conversation) and perhaps a task to follow that and possible, also, a review.

Variety should also be seen in the listening exercises of the text. An ideal situation would be a mixture of different ages, and English dialects, but at the least, the number of voices used should go beyond the same two people for every dialogue. Included in this variety, and worthy of its own point, is the issue of gender. Generally, speaking the role of women in Japan is somewhat different to that of Western women, so conversations including Japanese people should reflect the Japanese gender norms and where westerners are introduced the conversation emphasis should also display gender norms acceptable in western culture. To mix the two can present an unrealistic setting and cannot inform on differences of this nature.

After variety, we should look at the effectiveness of the activities themselves. For this part the main disciplines that should be included in a speaking course to some degree should be borne in mind. They are vocabulary, focus on form, pronunciation and fluency. The vocabulary should be graded somehow and increase in difficulty as the volumes of a series progress in difficulty. Also, common in many textbooks now are vocabulary dictionaries that allow students to pre-learn important words that might appear in the next lesson. As well as vocabulary introduction for each unit, there should be a regular recycling of key vocabulary at various stages throughout the book. Focus on form should be present, but being that it should be a communicative textbook, it should not pervade everything else. In the same respect so should pronunciation and fluency activities, which in the past might have either been left out of textbooks all together, or at the other extreme, concentrated on too much within a particular textbook. Now a better appreciation of the important of all these four areas of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency for EFL classes should be present in a good textbook.

Also, important for tackling new areas where the students have no prior knowledge or experience are schema-building exercises. A textbook should not dive right into a topic, unless, for example, a culture point is presented, but find ways of easing the students into addressing the topic by using schema-building exercises. Also, in real conversation, Richards (1990), believes that schema "...is one source of information for predicting "...the direction of conversation for certain topics". So not only does schema build expectations for a topic, it is vital that these expectations are sufficient to carry the speaker in to conversations outside the classroom.

Authenticity in materials is the next point to think about. Peacock (1997), states authentic materials can provide important cultural information, expose students to real language, and make teaching more creative. Indeed, there has to be a level of realism about the exercises or they will serve no purpose, or there will be little to prepare the students for English outside the classroom, where students know that native speakers will not conveniently slow down speech for them. There is of course, a problem in trying to deliver a listening or reading text that is going to be understood, without compromising authenticity. All textbook listening has been scripted before it is recorded onto a tape or CD, but at least allowances should be made in the listening for natural breaks like false starts, coughs, etc. Written dialogues cannot express speed, accents or background noises, so a good recording of a transcript should have each of these three elements in small amounts to add some authenticity. The way these dialogues are presented on the listening tape will be what makes a good dialogue either comprehensible, or not.

Also linked with authenticity is the notion of supplying an appropriate challenge. Remember that we are trying to reach the just above the beginner level, so there should be allowances for a possible lack of passive knowledge. Activities will need to be set at a suitable challenging level that will not overwhelm the already nervous student. Task-based teaching (Willis, 1996) is good at getting the students to work together on something like "planning a night out" or "conducting a survey", something they can enjoy in English, but may be used in the real world at some point.

For beginners, and any other level too, presenting dialogues enables students with limited structural knowledge to see how conversations are put together, and gives them something to memorize in whole chunks. They also offer introduction to functional work, another organizing unit of the layered syllabus, as students begin

to understand how phrases in English perform various tasks or functions e.g. apologizing or complimenting. Richards (2001), also claims that language presented in functional form throughout a curriculum can "...readily be linked to other types of syllabus content". Other content could be grammar, vocabulary or topics, he claims, which are easier to present and understand in the functional / dialogue form.

Most modern textbooks include a note from the author in the introduction. This is intended to impart the author's approach to teaching that they feel the book would be best used for. It's essential to read this part to make sure that the author's view on teaching matches your own in some way. However, that's not the end of it. A check should then be made of the individual units themselves. Do the objectives that appear at the beginning of a unit appear in the units, and also do the objectives follow the ideas the author expresses in the introduction? A book whose author claims to be communicative should not have units based solely on structural points.

When thinking about the theory of a textbook one important point to address is the creation of an atmosphere for acquisition of language to happen. Writers like Lightbown & Spada (1993) state that "...interactional modification promotes acquisition". This means language is most effective when adjusted via interaction between native and non-native speakers of varying proficiencies. A textbook that only provides activities for students to work by themselves is not taking advantage of valuable interaction opportunity. Any activity where students are required to obtain missing information from another partner in order to complete their own part can satisfy the interaction criteria. Three examples of this type of interaction could be interviews questions on a particular topic to ask a partner ; Ranking tasks (Willis, 1996), for which students are given a list of words, say, food types and then prioritize their partners' consensus on their favourite foods from the list ; and jigsaw readings when two students work from the same text, but each student has different parts missing. And together, through interaction, they seek the information the other partner has to make their own text whole. All these three activities work, but the jigsaw reading could be more conducive to interaction than interviews or ranking as jigsaw interaction is necessary to finish the task, but the other two types of activities could be completed alone just as easily.

Another vitally importance element is the opportunity for students to personalize and be given some autonomy for some part of their class activities within a topic,

Brophy (1998). Although textbooks offer a variety of ideas to keep the students engaged, ultimately, it would be the manner in which the student can personalize something of interest in the text that will give benefit and enjoyment to a student. At a minimum textbooks should provide a space for students to write their own answers, or even make their own questions about a topic, and at the other end of the autonomy spectrum, a good textbook could offer some kind of project.

As mentioned before, personalization is important and project work is one way of really drawing out creative talents and building confidence in students. Projects, to be done individually or in a group, can build on the skills and language encountered within the textbook and, in the form of tasks, can also be a great motivator for students, Robson (2003). At the project work stage all the vocabulary and structure necessary to carry out the project will have been covered. What remains is for a project to provide a viable way of combining the learnt material to enable the student to go out, seek and build ideas based on this knowledge for themselves. The project should be dealt with in manageable stages, so students can see how their ideas develop at each stage.

Lastly, each unit should offer opportunity to review the key themes taught throughout that unit. If the themes are easily identifiable, for instance, a function of inviting someone for a night out, the review must include this particular function. Review could be done in class, but again, if the examples and directions are clear enough the review is something that the student can spend his or her own personal time on consolidating. Without review the students' exposure to one form of English becomes limited and therefore less likely to be produced in future interactional activities.

3.0 Conclusion

The rise in demand for compulsory oral communication classes at universities in Japan has created a situation where a teacher could see their own weekly schedule full of these types of classes. In these classes students may or may not be interested in English, and have some knowledge of perhaps basic grammar or vocabulary, but lack communicative ability to use what they know in conversations. For teachers who have lots of oral communication classes to facilitate a problem may arise in the planning of each curriculum for a particular class. Ideally, a teacher should start with a blank sheet and design the curriculum based on a solid process starting with

a needs analysis and ending with teaching the final curriculum, and include a constant evaluation from the start to the finish of that process. However, time constraints make this process almost impossible. A way to save time and still deliver a good curriculum is to use a pre-published textbook. Now in Japan the number of textbooks on offer from major publishing for oral skills around the beginner level is very large. Also, textbooks themselves are produced to make money for their creators, so certain parts of the book may be compromised. Furthermore, all students could be potentially different in their views and how they see the world, so trying to band them all under one textbook has the potential for mismatch. This paper sets out to provide a practical chart that teachers can use as a checklist to evaluate possible textbooks they are considering as a curriculum for an oral communications class. A teacher can analyze a textbook by looking at the main criteria of physical characteristics, organization, topics and activities that have been broken down into further sub-criteria in Appendix A. One idea for use of the chart is to assign a score between zero and two points for each of the thirty-one criteria. Zero points means that the textbook has made no mention of the criterion; one point means that the criterion has been partially dealt with; and two points for a textbook when it has taken good care to meet the criterion. Even though such a chart is subjective, teachers still get a tangible score at the end of an evaluation, which should at least be the beginning of a basis for adoption or rejection of a specific textbook. Finally, although this paper has concentrated on beginner level students, it could be, with perhaps only slight alteration, adapted for other kinds of levels or purposes of oral communications.

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Important Criteria to Consider for Choosing a Speaking Text**Appendix A**

Important Criteria	Rating
Physical Characteristics	
- use of stimulating pictures	
- use of pictures that students can identify with	
- use of a variety of different text types & sizes	
- use of highlighting to show important points	
- spacing of text and pictures	
- standard of activity directions	
- standard of examples of activities	
Organization	
- standard of table of contents	
- effective use of organizing units	
Topics	
- relevance of topics to target group	
- number of topics (to allow selection & rejection (1))	
- mixture of topic groupings	
- opportunity to / explore topic in depth / or springboard (2)	
Activities	
- variety of all four major skill areas	
- ability of the activities to feed into each other	
- variety of voice types on listening tapes	
- effective use of both genders	
- effective use of vocabulary exercises	
- effective use of focus on form	
- effective use of pronunciation exercises	
- effective use of fluency exercises	
- effective use of schema-building exercises	
- authenticity of text	
- ability to deliver an appropriate challenge	
- ability to provide relevant "real-life" tasks	
- ability to provide good dialogues for function work	
- ability to provide objectives based on author's philosophy	
- ability to provide collaborative / interactional exercises	
- ability to encourage personalization of tasks (3)	
- opportunities for project work	
- opportunities to review previous material	

Possible
Rating
Key

2
points
Contains the
important criterion
to a reasonable
degree

1
point
Only contains
the important
criterion to a
small degree

0
points
Does not contain
the important
criterion to any
degree

Notes

- (1) Does the range and size of topics allow students to select one's they like and reject those they don't?
- (2) How well does the topic allow exploration in other related ideas.
- (3) How well does the task allow the students' own ideas or experience to be drawn into a task?

現日本の大学では会話の需要があるとともに、それに対してのクラスが増えている。理想的な会話のカリキュラムを作るのはすごく長いプロセスが必要と言う。しかし先生たちは、長いプロセスを作るにあつたてやるべきことがたくさんあり、いくら時間があっても足りない状況下にある。現段階ではテキストに頼っている。しかし、日本の出版会社は数多く会話のテキストがあるが、実際どれを選択するかが難しい、私が称えることは、先生たちの為のポイントが明記してあるチェックリストの製作が好ましい。